

Improving Educational Quality (IEQ) Project

**INVESTIGATING THE ROLE OF TEACHER'S HOME LANGUAGE  
IN MOTHER TONGUE POLICY IMPLEMENTATION:  
EVIDENCE FROM IEQ RESEARCH FINDINGS IN MALAWI**

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## INTRODUCTION

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Research that has been conducted on language in education has shown that children are quicker to learn to read and acquire other academic skills when instruction is in the language that they speak at home than when they are taught in an unfamiliar language (Langer, Bartolome, Vasquez, & Lucas: 1990; UNICEF, 1999:41). These findings have generated an international concern on the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction especially in the early years of primary schooling (see Mchazime: 1995). This is true especially in countries where for a long time indigenous languages were suppressed at school in preference for using a foreign language, usually the colonial language, and in some cases the language of the majority ethnic group as a medium of instruction for all the children. This practice of honoring children's rights to learn in a familiar language that they speak at home is now being reflected in school language policies of many countries (UNICEF, 1999: 44-45; see also Andoh-kumi: 2000 and Cheung & Randall: 2000)

The successful implementation of mother tongue instruction policy at the classroom level, however, depends on the teachers and the support that both teachers and learners receive from other stakeholders during the policy's implementation. Teachers play an important role in the implementation of not only mother tongue instruction policy but also of other educational reforms at the classroom level (see Littlewood: 1981: 19 and Wright: 1987:6). The language that teachers speak at home may sometimes derail the successful implementation of mother tongue instruction policy especially if teachers are asked to implement the policy in areas where their language is different from that of the learners. This is true especially in multilingual societies such as Malawi where, as Kaphesi (1994:4) argues, it is not easy to find a teacher who may be competent in all the major languages that are the home languages of the various school children. This paper, therefore, discusses some of the IEQ research findings in Malawi on the impact that the teacher's home language may have on policy implementation at the classroom level and on pupils' learning achievement in English, Chichewa and Mathematics.

## SCHOOL LANGUAGE POLICY IN MALAWI

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There are more than fifteen languages in Malawi (see Mangochi: 1971; Mchazime: 1996 and Kathewera: 1999). For a long time Chichewa, which is the national language and which is widely spoken in Malawi, was the only language that was used as a medium of instruction for all pupils in grades 1 through to 4. English, which is accorded the status of an official language, was initially taught as a subject from grade 1 and it was also used as a medium of instruction from grade 5 onwards. The rest of the languages were not featured in the school curriculum even though they were spoken by an arguably significant number of school children.

This policy of using the national language as a medium of instruction in all schools received a lot of support. Both pre-service and serving teachers were trained in how to use Chichewa as a medium of instruction in grades 1 to 4. In addition, pupils' textbooks and other supplementary teaching and learning materials were developed in Chichewa and distributed to all schools. Thus, there was a language match between teacher training and the available instructional materials but for many children this match was not consistent with their home language.

In 1996, the government of Malawi introduced a major reform in school language policy. In a letter that was circulated to all Regional Education Officers, District Education Officers and heads of educational institutions, the government directed that

".... with immediate effect all Standards 1, 2, 3, and 4 children in our schools be taught in their mother tongue or vernacular as a medium of instruction' (Ref. No. In/1/4 dated 28 March 1996)

This directive was followed by another government release (see The 'Nation' of 25 June 1996), which, while confirming the introduction of a new school language policy, upheld a previous policy on teacher posting. According to this release, teachers were still going to be posted to schools according to the need of a region or district and not necessarily because they speak the language of the area in which the school is located. These two policies brought a mismatch in the school language policy that might have affected the successful policy implementation at the classroom level.

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## OTHER EDUCATION REFORMS

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In 1994, a major reform of primary education was made. In this year, government introduced free primary education (FPE) for all children. The expressed intention for doing this was to improve pupil access to school. As was intended, this saw an additional 1.3 million children being enrolled for primary education. However, this sudden rise in pupil enrolment put a lot of pressure on the already overstretched resources of the education system. For example (also see Ministry of Education Science and Technology: 1998 and Jere et al: 2000).

- Teacher/pupil ratio increased from 1:35 to 1:60
- Classroom/pupil ratio increased from 1:60 to: 120
- Textbook/pupil ratio increased from 1:2 to 1:4

In order to alleviate teacher shortage, large numbers of untrained teachers were recruited. These were given an initial orientation course for 2 to 3 weeks on basic classroom practice. Thereafter these teachers were assigned to various schools where their services were needed. Like the other teachers who were already serving in schools, these new recruits received no training at all in how to use mother tongue as a medium of instruction.

These major reforms (i.e., the new language policy, the teacher posting policy, the introduction of free primary education, and the recruitment of untrained teachers) of Malawi's education system created some scenarios that affected the quality of education that children receive at the classroom level. It is on this understanding that the Malawi government in collaboration with donor agencies such as USAID decided to embark on formidable challenges of improving the quality of education in the country while meeting the tremendous demand (Jere et al: 1999:11).

In January 1999, with funding from USAID, the Quality Education through supporting Teachers (QUEST) project was launched in Mangochi by Save the Children Federation (USA). One of the objectives of QUEST was to enhance the quality of education in schools (Namathaka et al: 2000; see also Save the children: 2000). In order to achieve this objective, the project initially planned to conduct targeted research with the purpose of establishing positions in schools and guiding project interventions. However, through collaboration with the IEQ project and USAID, a partnership was formed between the Malawi Institute of Education and Save the Children Federation, Mangochi field office, with the purpose of expanding the research agenda and its potential to inform and guide national education policy. Of particular interest to stakeholders were questions that are related to quality of education and language that is used as a medium of instruction in the targeted classes.

## RESEARCH ON QUALITY EDUCATION

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It was against this background that the Improving Education Quality (IEQ) project in partnership with the Malawi Institute of Education and Save the Children Federation (US) with funding from USAID set out on a longitudinal study to investigate, among others, issues related to language such as:

- What are the academic and professional qualifications of teachers in the target area?
- What professional support do teachers receive?
- What language do teachers speak at home?
- What language do pupils in the target area speak at home?
- What medium of instruction is used in the target schools?
- How do Chiyao children perform in Mathematics, English and Chichewa when they are taught by a Chiyao speaking teacher and a teacher whose home language is other than Chiyao?

## METHODOLOGY

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This investigation was carried out during the 1999 school year in two districts in Malawi, both of which are predominantly Chiyao speaking areas. The sample included standards 2, 3 and 4 in 65 schools. In each class, boys and girls were randomly selected for inclusion. Their teachers, headteachers and

community leaders participated in the study as well. In February, shortly after the beginning of the school year, schools were visited and data were collected from 2000 pupils, 188 teachers, 65 headteachers, and at least one community group per school. Near the end of the school year, in October, researchers returned to the 65 schools and reassessed 1508 of the original pupils (75.4%). Data were once again collected from headteachers, teachers and community members.

In order to conduct this study, data collection instruments were developed on crucial issues that were seen as indicators of quality education. Pupil achievement instruments, which were curriculum based, were developed to assess pupils' performance in Mathematics, English and Chichewa. Interview instruments were developed for teachers, headteachers, pupils and the community in order to collect data on various areas that are indicators of quality education for children. In addition, lesson planning and observation instruments were developed in order to collect data on actual classroom practice, which is also another indicator of quality education.

The instruments were pilot-tested at two schools in Mangochi in February 1999 before they were revised for clarity of questions, level of difficulty and number and range of questions. Using pilot test data, three parallel forms of the tests were assembled. Prior to data collection, research assistants were recruited and trained.

Data were collected over three week periods in February and October. The research teams which comprised one observer, 3 assessors, one interviewer and one logistician spent 3 days to complete collecting data at each school. Following collection, data were coded, entered into the computer and analyzed. What follows therefore are some of the findings on language related issues.

## TEACHERS

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Various data on teachers was collected through interview. This included data on their academic and professional qualifications and the languages that they speak at home.

Data on teachers' qualifications were collected through asking them to state their highest academic and professional qualifications. These investigations revealed that 75.6% of the teachers in the survey are Junior Certificate of Education (JCE) holders (i.e., two years of secondary school education) whereas 24.4% are holders of the Malawi School Certificate of Education (i.e., four years of secondary school education). In addition, the investigations revealed that the majority of teachers in the survey (61%) lacked the training necessary to be qualified as teachers.

During this interview, teachers were also asked to report the languages that they speak at home and to rate their proficiency in the other Malawian languages. The results of this investigation show that 67% of the teachers interviewed indicated that they could not speak Chiyao which is the predominant

language that is spoken in this target area. However, the majority of these teachers (96%) reported that they could speak Chichewa, which is currently the only national language, without any difficulty.

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## SUPPORT TO TEACHERS AND LEARNERS

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A lot of data on the support that teachers and learners receive from stakeholders was collected. This included the professional support that teachers receive generally and the assistance that learners get from parents through monitoring how well they learn at school.

Data on professional support that teachers receive were collected by asking teachers to report the number of in-service courses they had attended over a period of three years and the number of times they were supervised by a primary education advisor (PEA) during the academic year.

On in-service courses attended (see also Save the Children (US): 2000:8) as at October 1999, 7% of the teachers interviewed reported that they had never attended any in-service training (INSET), whereas 20% said that they only attended one INSET, 25% two INSETs and the rest three INSETs or more. A further investigation, however, revealed that use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction was not one of the subjects that were discussed during these inservice courses.

The investigations also suggested that the supervision of teachers by PEAs was not regular. Of the 188 teachers interviewed, 15% reported that they had not been supervised by a PEA at all, 20% reported that they were supervised once while the rest said that they were supervised more than once.

Data on the support to learners were collected through asking community members to report on whether they give assistance to their wards through monitoring how well they learn at school. These investigations revealed that a significant number (19%) of the parents did not monitor how well their pupils were learning at school (also see Save the Children Federation: 2000:16).

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## INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

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Data that were collected on instructional materials included availability of and the language that is used in these books. These data were collected through visual inspection and counting manually all the books that are used for teaching Mathematics, General Studies, English and Chichewa. These investigations revealed that none of the textbooks are written in Chiyao, the mandated language of instruction for Mathematics and General Studies for the Chiyao speaking children in the standards that were studied. Although a good number of schools that were visited had teachers' guides for these four core subjects, some schools did not have any Teachers' Guides for these subjects (10% for Mathematics, 3% for English, 14% for Chichewa and 9% for General Studies). It was also found that pupils' books (see books published by MIE: 1994) for General Studies and Mathematics were written

in Chichewa whereas their accompanying Teachers' Guides were written in English. Moreover, further investigations on lesson planning and delivery showed that all the lesson plans, except those of Chichewa were written in English.

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## PUPILS' HOME LANGUAGE

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A lot of data on pupils was collected during this survey. This included the languages that they commonly speak at home. These data on pupils' home language were collected through asking pupils to mention the language they speak at home. These investigations revealed that the majority of pupils (64%) indicated that they speak Chiyao, whereas 35% of the pupils reported that they speak Chichewa and only 1% said that they speak other languages.

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## MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION IN GRADES 1 TO 4

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The data on medium of instruction were collected through interviews with headteachers of all the 65 schools in Mangochi and Balaka districts. During this interview, headteachers were asked to identify the languages that are used for instruction in standards 1-4 in their school. Headteachers could give more than one language as medium of instruction in their schools. Chichewa was given as one of the languages of instruction by 85% of the headteachers. Chiyao was given by 32%. A closer look at the pupils whose home language is Chiyao indicated that 43% of these pupils were in schools where Chiyao was not mentioned by the headteacher as a language of instruction in standards 1-4.

In addition to headteacher interview, teachers were observed while teaching English, Chichewa and Mathematics. One of the rated features in this observation was: "Teacher uses mother tongue to help the learner grasp a point being made." It was observed that the majority of teachers seen (54.5% in mathematics, 33.2% in English and 55.7% in Chichewa) did not use mother tongue to help the learners grasp a point made in that lesson. However, a closer look at the pupils whose home language is Chiyao indicated the following:

- a Yao pupils whose teachers used mother tongue to help the pupil grasp a point performed better in English reading and comprehension (standard 4 only), and in Mathematics (standard 2 only) than Yao pupils whose teachers were weak in using or never used mother tongue to help the learner grasp a point.
- b On the other hand, Yao pupils whose teachers used mother tongue during Chichewa lessons performed less well in Chichewa reading and comprehension than Yao pupils whose teachers did not use mother tongue for Chichewa instruction. This may reflect the classroom mixture - teachers not using mother tongue during Chichewa instruction may be doing so because more



pupils in the class were competent in Chichewa - thus the Yao pupils would be in classes with Chichewa pupils and have more opportunities to master Chichewa.

#### MATCH BETWEEN TEACHER AND PUPIL HOME LANGUAGE

Another area that was investigated during this study is what happens to Chiyao speaking pupils who are taught by teachers whose home language is Chiyao or some other language. This was done by asking both pupils and teachers in the sample about the language that they commonly speak at home. Analyses revealed that pupils in the study whose home language was Chichewa were very likely to have a teacher whose home language was Chichewa. This was true for about 76% of the Chichewa pupils. On the other hand, pupils whose home language was Chiyao were not likely to have a teacher whose home language was Chiyao. Only 29% of the Yao pupils in the study had teachers whose home language was Chiyao (30% for standard 2, 17% for standard 3 and 29% for standard 3).

Mathematics, English and Chichewa performance of Chiyao speaking children who were taught by Chiyao speaking teachers and teachers of other languages was compared. Pupils were tested at the beginning of the school year and again at the end of the school year. In all of the analyses involving pupil performance, the findings were based on end of year performance after controlling for performance at the beginning of the year.

Analyses revealed that Chiyao speaking pupils who were taught by Chiyao speaking teachers performed significantly better in Mathematics in grade 2 than Chiyao speaking children who were taught by speakers of other languages. In grades 3 and 4, however, differences in performance in Mathematics were not significant [ $F(4, 822) = 2.71, p < .03$ ]. In English performance, Chiyao speaking pupils taught by Chiyao speaking teachers performed significantly better than Chiyao speaking pupils who were taught by non-Chiyao speaking teachers. As shown in the table below, Chiyao pupils who are taught by Chiyao teachers read English with greater accuracy than Chiyao pupils who are taught by non-Yao teachers [ $F(2, 810) = 3.23, p < .04$ ].

**Average English Reading Accuracy for Chiyao Pupils**

Grade	Teacher Home Language	Mean
2	Chichewa	18.93
	Chiyao	20.71
3	Chichewa	28.07
	Chiyao	39.19
4	Chichewa	38.96
	Chiyao	43.78

In Chichewa, the difference between the performance of Chiyao pupils taught by Chiyao teachers and Chiyao pupils taught by non-Chiyao teachers was not significant.

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## LESSON LEARNED

These findings suggest that disconnects exist between the teacher's home language, the pupils' home language and the language used in instructional materials. The implication that this scenario may have is that children in grades 1 to 4 may be learning some subjects in three or more languages. This is so because the books that the learners read are still written in Chichewa, the teachers prepare their lessons in English (except in Chichewa) and teach them using a local language which may be the children's home language or another vernacular (Chilora: 2000). Thus children may be exposed to Chichewa, English, the teacher's home language and their own home language in one lesson. Obviously this does not make learning any easier. This state of affairs, therefore, raises the following questions: How can policy makers ensure that a policy on mother tongue instruction is successfully implemented by those who are entrusted with this responsibility? What support should policy makers and other stakeholders give to teachers and learners during policy implementation?

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## CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed reforms in language in education that have been made in primary education in Malawi. The paper has pointed out some disconnects that exist in these reforms especially between mother tongue instruction policy, teacher posting policy and the language used in the instructional materials. These disconnects are affecting the successful implementation of mother tongue instruction policy in the target area where the majority of pupils speak Chiyao. Also noted was that even with these disconnect in materials, training, and so on, Chiyao pupils benefited in Mathematics and English from having a teacher who spoke Chiyao and who used Chiyao during instruction. The paper, therefore, suggests that if the language policy is to be successfully implemented, appropriate measures should be put in place. There must be the political will and the practical resources to support the policy. Otherwise we may have a beautiful policy on paper that no one may implement at the classroom level.

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